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AUTHOR Rose, Anna; Pieratos, Anna
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the migrant adolescent in Australia; specifically, the migrant of European origin, both newly arrived and Australian-born. The migrant experience can be perceived as being a dynamic psychosocial process that is uniquely experienced by each individual. In this process, the migrant adolescent has to deal simultaneously with two cultures while also trying to achieve a sense of psychological separation from the parents and a unique personal identity. Such a developmental stage can be fraught with family tension and conflict. The experiences or choices of one individual can be in accord or conflict with another in the family. The migrant adolescent may not have the support of the normal stability of the family to rely on, as the family members may also be undergoing social and role change. The universal generation gap can become a gap between cultures and may appear to some adolescents to be unbridgeable and unresolvable. Results for some can be increased family conflict and heightened individual anxiety. A case study illustrates the way in which cultural beliefs can be understood when looked at in the cultural context in a counselling situation. Practical suggestions for working with migrant families conclude the discussion. (RH)

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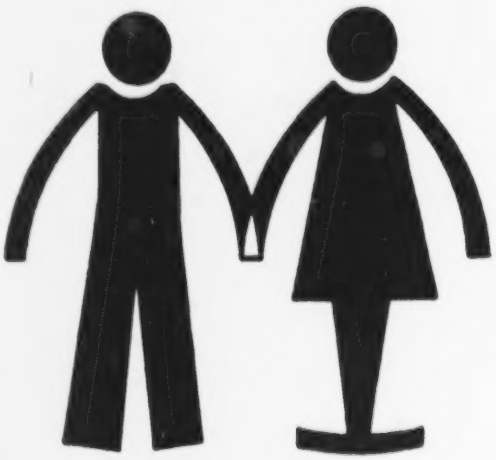

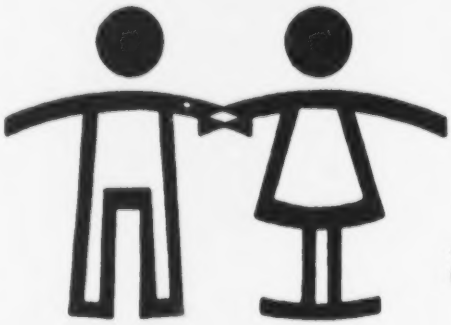

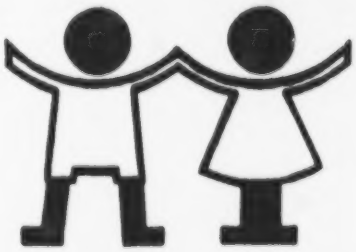

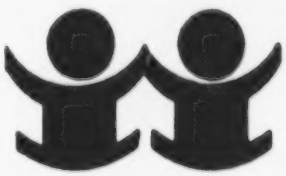

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THE PERSPECTIVE OF MIGRANT ADOLESCENTS

By Anna Rose
Anna Pieratos

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THE PERSPECTIVE OF MIGRANT ADOLESCENTS

Anna Rose — School Counsellors
Anna Pieratos — N.S.W. Dept. of Education

ABSTRACT

The migrant experience can be perceived as being a dynamic psychosocial process that is uniquely experienced by each individual. Within this process the migrant adolescent is placed in the position of having to deal with two cultures simultaneously while trying to achieve a sense of psychological separation from the parents and a unique personal identity. Such a developmental stage can be a time fraught with family tension and conflict particularly during adolescence.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper it is my aim to discuss the migrant adolescent in Australia and specifically the migrant of European origin, both newly-arrived or Australian-born.

The time of sweeping generalizations **about** and **across** cultures is gone. At the heart of this paper is the notion that each person is a unique individual whose life, values and attitudes are influenced by his or her past experience and social context as well as **the present.** It is the interplay or perhaps conflict between these elements that form a unique present that we call the migrant experience. One that may be as alien to one's past experiences (i.e. culture) as it is to one's present.

THE MIGRATION PROCESS

The act of migration is not simply a transfer from one country or culture to another but a living interplay of past and present, a desire to understand and manipulate the present through the framework of past experience - some of which for the migrant adolescent in a pluralistic society, is very different from that of their peers. From this point of view, therefore, it seems appropriate to understand the migrant experience within the context of a dynamic psychosocial process that is **uniquely experienced** by each individual.

The migrant experience as defined by Sluzki (1979) can be analyzed by looking at the psychosocial stages within the actual continuum of the migration process (p.380). If one however, is to look at the migrant experience from this perspective, then the application of concepts and labels such as first and second generation tend to become less valid as a defining category or description of the migrant adolescent.

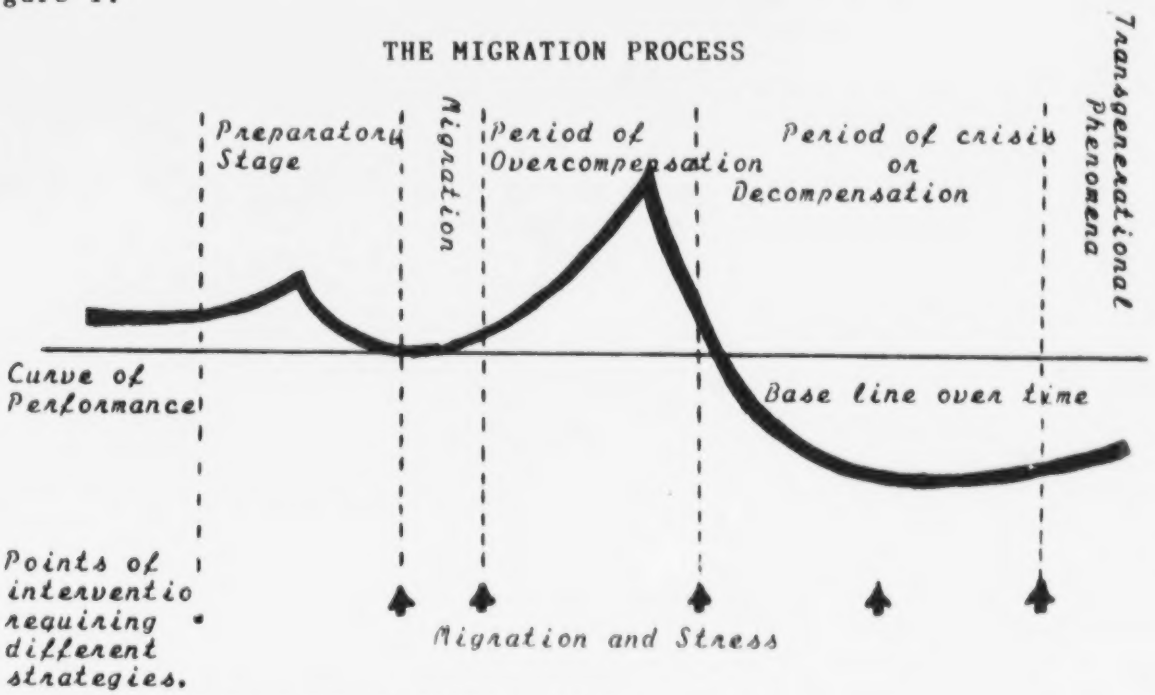
There are five stages within the migration process and within each stage the migrant family undergoes a number of psychological stresses and changes while trying to adapt to the new country.

The five stages are as follows:

(1) The Preparatory Stage
(2) The Act of Migration
(3) The Period of Overcompensation
(4) The Period of Crisis or Decompensation
(5) Transgenerational Phenomena

Each stage has distinctive characteristics, triggers different types of family coping mechanisms and unlocks different types of conflict and symptoms which can cut across generations. The continuum of migration is analogous graphically to the curve of performance under stress.

Figure 1.



* Diagram from Sluzki(1979,p.381)

(1)The Preparatory Stage

This is the stage when the concrete moves are made by the family members to migrate. A first "up and down" curve will frequently appear, expressed as a short period of euphoria and an also short period of overload, dismay and poor performance that habitually does not acquire major proportions and tends to be explained away as the natural result of efforts, tensions and emotions. In this course of ups and downs, new family rules about roles and functions in relation to migration begin to be negotiated among the members. Migration is described by migrants as an act either loaded with negative motivations or connotations (such as to escape political oppression) or with positive connotations (such as to make a better living).

(2)The Act of Migration

Some families are forced to migrate and so the act of migration is final and unchangeable, whereas other families

affirm that they migrate "only for a little while" regardless of the likelihood of a return. Other families decide, a priori, that the country they have chosen will be their home country and will never move.

(3) **Period of Overcompensation**

Migratory stress isn't felt immediately however, it's cumulative and often migrants are not aware of this. In fact, during this time we see a heightened task oriented efficiency which is necessary in fulfilling the basic need for family survival and adaptation to an alien environment and culture. If the migrant family is faced with a combination of extreme circumstances and a lack of coping skills, this can function to trigger massive crises in this period, with family disorganisation or multiple symptoms. At the same time, the majority of migrant families manage to establish and maintain a moratorium on the process of acculturation and accommodation. That is, all postmigration conflicts and symptoms remain dormant. This moratorium technique is the collective myth that "they will return to the country of origin after some time". This technique functions to allow families to cling to the old country's norms and to refuse to engage with the new environment. This coping stategy can only last for a certain period of time. The fantasy will collapse under the pressure of the new reality which will precipitate a major crisis.

(4) **Period of Decompensation or Crisis**

This is a stormy period, full of conflicts, symptoms and difficulties. During this period the main task of the recently migrated family takes place. That is, the reshaping of its new reality, maximising both the family's continuity in terms of identity and its compatibility with the environment. Often these two tasks compete and require a somewhat reasonable compromise for their accomplishment. The children catch up with the new culture and the new language (verbal and non-verbal) much more rapidly than the parents. Many family rules and values that were effective in the country of origin may prove to be less adaptive in the culture and circumstances of the country of adoption. In some families role reversal sets in where the child experiences a sense of power over the parents while the parents experience their dependence on the child. Many children in this situation begin to lose respect for their parents and so perceive them as being stupid, backward and become ashamed of them and resent submitting to any discipline. The family in this situation is forced to change its styles and rules (some of which have been pivotal ones) and in order to do this the group has to activate delicate and complex **rules about changes of** rules. Many families are faced with the task of suddenly having to develop and establish these rules.

(5) **Trans-generational Impact**

It is within this stage that any long-term delay in the family's adaptive process will tend to become apparent when a second generation is raised in the country of adoption. Whatever has been avoided by the first generation will

appear in the second one, generally expressed as a **clash between generations.** Throughout this stage the children bring into the family drastically different values which bring to the surface the **long delayed or latent** conflicts of acculturation.

Dreidger (1975) suggests a number of useful parameters for the description of ethnic identity within each stage of the migration process which may vary from stage to stage (p159).

These are:

(a) Religion
(b) Endogamy
(c) Language Use
(d) Ethnic Organisations
(e) Parochial Education
(f) Ingroup Friends

These become parameters within each stage. Individuals and, or families may move through these stages, not necessarily in this set order. However, the principles are psychological. Conflict within individual stages may be resolved or become latent only to be manifest in later generations.

Many migrants in Australia have managed to maintain their separate identities (though at differing degrees) over the years through the use of their own language and social networks including ethnic organisations and religious institutions which serve the purpose of validating and legitimizing their cultural identity (Bottomley 1976, p118).

Ethnic identity as Rosenthal (1984) points out, should in fact be viewed as a **dynamic multidimensional process arising out of intergroup interactions.** Migrant adolescents manage to define themselves through the context of their ethnic group by developing an awareness of boundaries between their own ethnic group and other outgroups. In order to understand the ethnic identity the adolescent develops, one must examine both the features of the minority culture which subjectively contributes to the individual's perceptions of his or her group's separateness from the dominant society and, indeed, other ethnic minority groups, (Rosenthal 1984 p3-4).

Australian-born children of migrant background or migrant children educated in Australia are subject to a number of stresses which are directly related to a combination of family expectations and rules, the peer culture (which the majority of times is diametrically opposed to cultural and familial rules and expectations) and the school system (a system which migrant parents know little about and which often leads them to develop unrealistic expectations for their children).

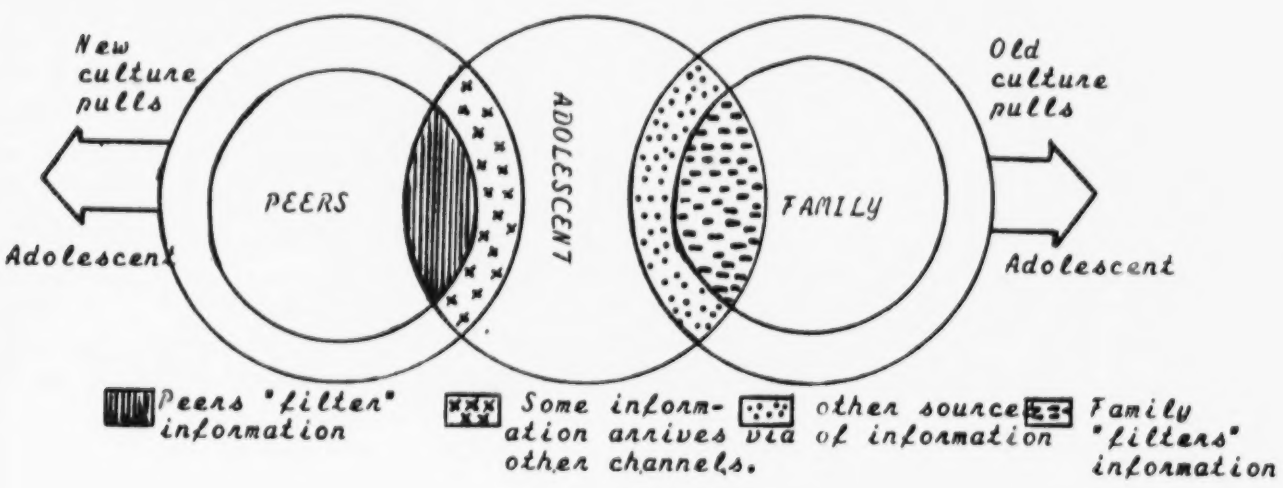
In addition to these stresses the migrant family follows and abides by a set of morals and values or variations of those which existed as the parents remember and interpret them in their country of origin. This is known as the 'broken clock' syndrome, (Krupinsky 1984). The parents for various reasons tied in with the migration

process, don't realise or choose not to accept that developments and changes have taken place within their own culture since their departure. Children in such families become aware or conscious of these values or attitudes during the adolescent period. It is at this point in time that migrant adolescents begin to question the validity of their parents' ideas and on many occasions justify their perceptions by drawing a comparison between their family and the Australian community at large through the families of their immediate peer group friends.

It is at this point that the migrant families begin to experience conflict as a number of latent issues relating to the migration process rise to the surface through the adolescent's development. Rosenthal (1984,p1) indicates that migrant families tend to experience quite a lot of family tension and conflict when their children reach adolescence over and above that experienced by Anglo-Australian adolescents and families. This is the time when inter-generational conflict between parents and adolescents begins. The child in fact has to cope with being a teenager as well as belonging and functioning (according to parental and wider ethnic community expectations) within two cultures **simultaneously.** It is during this time that the migrant adolescent experiences great turbulence, difficulty in arriving at a personal identity, latent anxiety and excessive rebelliousness or conformity.

To summarize to this point:- The migrant adolescent either newly arrived or born in Australia, faces choices both as an individual and as a member of his or her family. The experiences or choices of one individual can be in accord or complete conflict with another in his or her family or the family with peers and so on. Carpio (1981) presents a somewhat simplistic but nevertheless useful model of the adolescent within a transcultural setting (p30).

Figure 2. * From Carpio (1981, p.30)

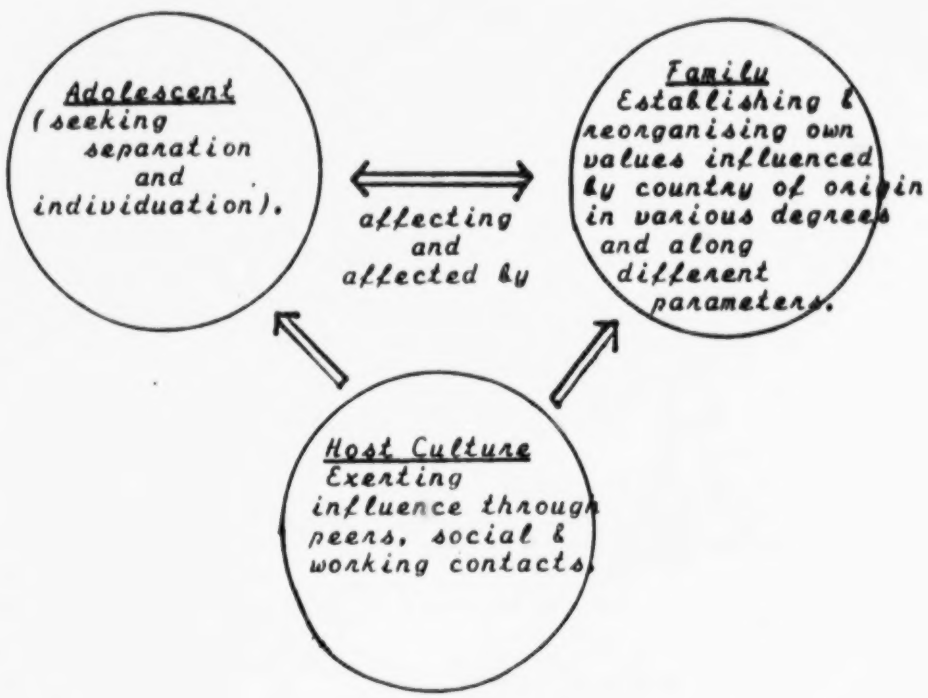


The migrant adolescent must work through the well documented process of adolescence with its conflicts and desires to achieve autonomy or a sense of psychological separation from the parents and a unique personal identity. The problem is, however, that the migrant adolescent may not have the support of the normal stability of the family to rely on, as the family members are also undergoing social and role change. The identity desired by the migrant adolescent, which sometimes is supported by peers, may indeed tend towards the resolution of an image different from and at times, in conflict with the image the family may have. In this instance, the universal generation gap can become a gap between cultures which to some appears unbridgable and perhaps unresolvable. The result therefore, for some adolescents can be increased family conflict and heightened individual anxiety. For the migrant family it could mark what it sees as an attack on the family's agreed system, rules and values by the agent (host culture) of the outside world. Feelings of great vulnerability and alienation set in and some families react by a general retreat or encapsulation ie., adhering to the 'broken clock' syndrome.

This phenomenon transcends time and applies equally to newly arrived migrants or those of families born in Australia.

The adolescent experience and its ramifications for the family can be a significant catalyst for the migrant family who as a unit may be seeking to stabilize an identity within its host culture as well as the individual ethnic community. This can be visually described in the following way.

Figure 3:


Adolescent
(seeking separation and individuation).
affecting and affected by
Family
Establishing & reorganising own values influenced by country of origin in various degrees and along different parameters.
Host Culture
Exerting influence through peers, social & working contacts.

In addition to the process of separation and individuation, the migrant adolescent will also have to react to the demands of the family and the society. Carpio (1981) has identified four typical adolescent methods of reaching a bicultural resolution which are relevant both on an individual and familial level:

(1) Resistance to assimilation.
(2) Attempt to become assimilated as quickly as possible.
(3) Remain proud of culture.
(4) Pride in one's own culture combined with ability to appreciate the new.

This then brings me to the question of bicultural conflict. Early interpretations of the migrant experience made the assumption that any identification with two cultures would necessarily result in conflict and hence lead to problems in adjustment. This point of view neglected the possibility that adolescents could reach a bicultural solution where the adolescent could function in both cultures separately. It is still however, very unclear in the literature whether there exists a link between biculturalism, culture conflict and maladjustment. Some studies have however reported that the dual cultural experience associated with the migration process, results in, for example, poorer self-image for some groups in some domains, mental health problems, low academic achievement or a confused sense of personal identity. This issue has yet to be thoroughly tested and could possibly be a challenging task for the future. (Rosenthal 1984, 1985.)

CASE STUDY

This case study illustrates the issue of cultural beliefs and how they can be understood when looked at in cultural context in a counselling situation.

Facts - X was referred to the counsellor because of:-

a) X's nonchalance over her mother's death,
b) X's inability to concentrate in class prior to and after her mother's death,
c) X's expressed wish of not wanting to live at home any longer.

X is Chinese and arrived in Australia with her mother, aunt and maternal grandmother from Vietnam approximately 5 years ago. The father remained in Thailand on business for an additional 2 years before coming to Australia with his mother to join his family.

X's mother was taken ill, suffering from a terminal illness. During the mother's illness the family became polarized and the mother openly declared she wished to make a Will which would allow X to be cared for by the maternal grandmother.

The mother declared her husband didn't love her or X. Whilst the mother was talked out of this by legal workers she still apparently told X that her father "was not a father to her" and that she must live with the maternal grandmother.

She apparently frequently talked to X about her father in an unfavourable manner. X's in laws do not have a good relationship with each other and this apparently was the case prior to the mother's illness.

X currently lives with the paternal grandmother and father. X's mother died about 4 weeks prior to counselling after suffering from cerebral malignancy.

Salient Counselling Issues that Arose from the Initial Interview:

1. X doesn't want to live with father. Claims she doesn't like him, she hates him, and that she felt this way before her mother was ill.

2. X claims father prevents her seeing maternal grandmother but that she knows nothing will prevent her from being with her **mother** and grandmother.

3. X was constantly with her mother during her illness. Mother used to warn father against scolding her by saying "if you scold her you scold me."

4. X claims she is angry with her mother for dying and leaving her, yet her mother is still with her in the house, and only her body is dead. Her mother therefore will protect her. (Can she ever allow herself to love dad while "mum" is still there?).

5. Doesn't like her house as mother told her that it was bad luck. Mother also communicated this issue to the Indo-Chinese worker involved. Four months after the house was purchased the mother was told she was dying.

6. X shares a room with dad as her two male cousins have come to live in the house, and she does not wish to share with grandmother who smokes. X's mother used to sleep in her playroom and X feels she cannot sleep there because she believes there's a bad spirit which makes people sick.

7. X feels in some way responsible for mother's death.

POINTS OF CONCERN FOR COUNSELLOR WHEN ASSESSING CONTENT OF CLINICAL AND CASE MANAGEMENT MATERIAL.

1. The issue of cultural beliefs should be looked at within the related cultural context. There are 4 issues of concern here. They are:-

(a) X believes mother is still with her in the house and that only the body is dead.

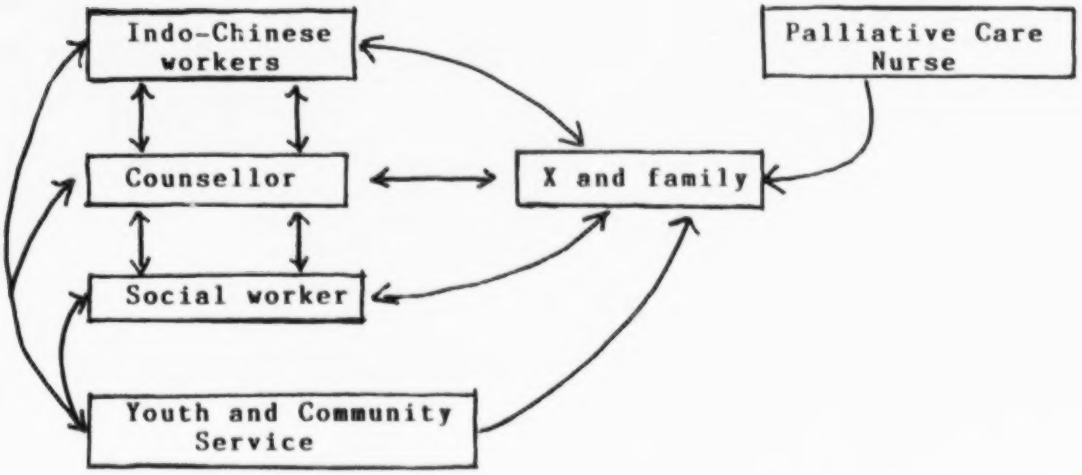
(b) X believes her mother will protect her.

(c) X believes the house now brought bad luck because of what X's mother had stated.

(d) X can no longer sleep in the playroom where mother slept because of the bad spirit that exists there which makes people sick.

The question for the counsellor is how much of this material reflects pathology and how much reflects the cultural beliefs of X's family. X's beliefs and fears are linked to cultural notions of death, stemming from her religion (Buddhism). These issues can be clarified and the possibility of pathology examined by setting up a case management plan of intervention whereby effective counsellor - agency interaction and communication takes place.

This plan is illustrated schematically thus:-



Case Progress

In the initial sessions, the counsellor saw X by herself and focussed on the expression of her anger towards the hospital, father, self and mother. The counsellor also obtained information from the Indo-Chinese workers as to the cultural content of the symbolic material about ghosts and spirits which she elicited from X. The issue of X's fears about the evil spirit inhabiting the play-room was approached by instructing X to keep a daily journal with regard to 'witching feelings.' Questions of permanence, such as the decomposition of the body were discussed as was X's anger towards father for destroying mother.

A home visit by the counsellor, the district officer and an Indo-Chinese worker was arranged. The early discussion centered round X's school progress and her poor concentration was tied in with grief reaction. An acknowledgement was made of the intrusion into the family, as father felt angry about this. Cultural variations were talked about. The visit ended with the sharing of food.

In the final session X was seen alone and the home situation was reviewed. This led on to the theme of death and a focussing on the issue of decomposition vs Buddhist beliefs. A review of the burial ritual continued by going through the funeral service with X who expressed a wish to visit the grave. This was arranged:

There follows a drawing made by X during the course of her counselling.

Copy of child's drawing. 7/85.

Child was asked to draw a picture of home and the family.

is not a good house
sthing inside make people sick."

yellow sun
(blue)
Q.: Who's inside house?
A: mother and father and father's grand-mother
Q.: mother is still there?
A: Yes at night time. A bulls head and a horses head bring her home my dad. told me.
At night I dream of mother.
black door
"I'm feeding a horse"
I haven't got a pot.

DISCUSSION

Identification and acknowledgement of the cross-cultural issues in this case study determined the direction the case would take. The issue of X's interpretation and understanding of death was crucial to the type of intervention decided upon. Once the cultural interpretation had been established, it was possible to understand X's symbolic system in context.

Further the mother's illness had created extreme stress over and above the natural migratory stress being experienced by the family. In addition to the stress factor, a lack of coping skills existed as the family was faced with extreme circumstances. - the death of a significant family member. This was exemplified in the polarization of the family when the mother openly declared that she wished X to be cared for by the maternal grandmother. At this point it was obvious that the family was in crisis. Support was needed so that the existing and extended family members could undertake the task of reshaping the family's new reality.

Intervention for this family was also a point of concern as this was interpreted by the father as an intrusion. The father's reluctance was over-come by encouraging him to talk through his anger about the issue. It was important to have the support of the Indo-Chinese workers in communicating to the father the concerns that affected X at the school level. The father's authority was confirmed and the natural family support system was mobilized.

Practical Suggestions for Working with Migrant Families

Many counselling techniques have been used by people counselling migrants. Technically, counselling migrants should be no different than counselling any other individual. However, an understanding of the context the individual comes from, the family and the basis from which the adolescent draws its values and perhaps identity seems essential, for as Sluzki states, the orientation of some therapies towards individuation and independence can be in direct conflict with the particular family system and identity.

The following points highlight a number of important issues one should be aware of when working with migrant families. (Lau 1 p103-104). The therapist should:

(1) Have knowledge of the **family's cultural and religious** background in sufficient detail in order to assess the content of the clinical material.

(2) have an awareness of **cultural rules to do with authority,** authority structures, differentiation and boundaries, so that incongruent messages to the family can be avoided.

(3) Have an awareness of the **cultural defences and the natural** support systems ie., the extended family.

(4) Have **communication problems** clarified and resolved. Interpreters' should be organised if necessary.

(5) **Confirm the parent's authority role with respect to the children.** The family's sense of power needs to be mobilized and used effectively.

Migrant adolescents can be assisted individually through the implementation of in-school programmes such as:

(1) Self-esteem and Assertiveness Training programmes

(2) Peer Support programmes

(3) Use of Ethnic Health and Welfare Workers to assist designing of personal development programmes

(4) Art therapy programmes

To sum up then, the migrant adolescent is faced with the complex task of achieving, in an individual way, psychological separation from the parents, as well as simultaneously integrating differing norms and expectations held by the host culture and the culture of origin during the process of identity formation. There is no doubt that this period of development is a testing time and a significant turning point for the dynamics of the migrant family and the psychological life of the migrant adolescent.

This paper is based on a talk given at the community seminar "The Identity of Ethnic Youth" held at the Y.W.C.A. by the Foundation for Child and Youth Studies in conjunction with the 'Federation for Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia.

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